

Editorial and Articles for PDiE 42 (2)

EDITORIAL

Different ways of researching and reflecting on professional development

There are various possibilities for categorising and grouping the articles in this issue, each with its own logic and each foregrounding different aspects of professional development in education. A geographical filter emphasises international reach, with three papers from the North America, three from Europe, two from Australasia, and one from Africa. A methodological filter exposes an array of research approaches and methods of generating and analysing data, including evaluation, case study, experiment, narrative, questionnaire, interview, critical discourse analysis, documentary analysis and statistical tests. An alternative filter could sort articles into those that consider professional development needs, approaches, programmes, experiences, resulting practices or impact. Yet another classification, and the one broadly used to order the papers in this issue, is based on focus and scale: three articles consider policy at a national or state level; two are concerned with online communities; and the remaining four focus on classroom teachers with studies reporting data from between six and 159 teachers.

As readers, researchers, practitioners or policy makers we have our own special interests, so there is likely to be something in this fairly eclectic mix of articles to which we each feel particularly drawn. However, reading through all the articles I am reminded of the pleasure of discovery, of the stimulation of learning something new, and of how engaging with the unfamiliar aids reflection on the familiar. I hope that as well as finding articles of direct relevance to your work, you also enjoy and value learning about varied aspects of professional development through diverse methodologies in perhaps unfamiliar contexts. Such excursions can trigger insights into ‘home territory’.

The first article is by Girmaw Abebe Akalu who conducted a critical discourse analysis of a national policy framework for teachers’ professional development. Close and careful textual analysis revealed underpinning assumptions and discourses of school effectiveness and teaching viewed as technical skill. Teachers are seen as central, hence the need for professional development, but are positioned ‘as being deficient and simultaneously shouldered with the responsibility of fixing societal and school problems’ (Larsen 2010, p. 208). Akalu observes at the end of the article that this neo-liberal agenda with its associated ideologies and discourses dominates teacher policy reforms around the world, and in so doing ‘deprofessionalises teacher professionalism’. Critical discourse analysis is a powerful tool that Akalu advocates educators and teachers using to interrogate policy scripts in contexts beyond Ethiopia, the particular locale for this study. While the message and methodology have near universal applicability, it is also valuable to become aware of the particularities of professional development policy in Ethiopia, which within Africa is second only to Nigeria in terms of population. Education systems and teachers in developing and low-income countries face particular challenges, yet they are of global concern both from a humanitarian perspective and, in an increasingly interconnected world, also from a position of self-interest.

In the second paper Michael A. Owens, Ben Pogodzinski and William E. Hill evaluate a state policy for job-embedded professional development using criteria derived through a literature review by Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2009). Owen and colleagues apply these generic criteria for professional development of relevance, focus, goal orientation and social scope to the seven indicators and expected outcomes of the State of Michigan's (USA) professional learning policy. They found that the policy's indicators together broadly met the four criteria, but some limitations in the policy led them to make suggestions for further improvement. The Michigan policy is particularly interesting in that it emphasizes professional learning *in situ*, it applies not only to teachers but also to school administrators, support staff and paraprofessionals, and the committee behind the policy included this extended professional group as well as parents and other community members.

Lorraine Thomas' article is the third policy-related one, and focuses on the (short lived) proposal for teaching in England to become a master's level profession. Thomas was interested in stakeholders' perceptions of the Master's in Teaching and Learning (DCSF, 2008) that was seen as the main means of achieving this aspiration. She gathered views from newly qualified teachers who were the prime target for the new qualification, early career teachers who had recently completed it, and two heads of university education departments that offered the qualification. Data were gathered through questionnaire, focus group and interviews respectively, from just 53 respondents in total, all located in one region of England. A change of government in 2010 led to a cessation of support for the new degree – and indeed to a retreat not just a reversal of national policy: since 2012 certain categories of state schools have been able to employ people with no formal teaching qualifications at all. So in many ways Thomas's article is a historic piece, but its findings encompassing both support for the aspiration of a master's level profession and some concerns are worthy of consideration by universities and national policymakers.

The next two articles are concerned with professional development supported by online communities. Margarida Morais Marques' and colleagues' case study of the dynamics of a Portuguese online community of practice involved both secondary science teachers and university researchers. Their research focused on one group of five teachers and three researchers as they engaged in two rounds of action research. Marques conducted documentary analysis of posts in online fora along with any attached documents, and descriptive statistics of participants' use of the platform during the two years of the project. The data were analysed in relation to a model of community of practices' stages of development, and found to fit an adaption of Wenger et al.'s (2002) model. Appended to the article is a summary and comparison of several models of community of practices' stages of development – a useful resource in itself.

Hanna Teräs also studied online professional development, in her case analysing data from seven university teachers. She was interested in the participants' perceptions of their experience of the programme and of its impact on their teaching. Teräs prompted the teachers to tell the stories of their professional journey either through written narratives or spoken interviews. As in the previous article Teräs used the concept of stages in her data analysis, but maintained the narrative approach by constructing 'a three-act structured story for each of the seven narrators' that were in turn re-analysed and presented back in narrative form interweaving perceptions from each of the

participants. This method illustrated vividly the group's diversity, provided examples of significant professional growth through experiencing difficulty, and revealed knowledge that other approaches may not have surfaced.

The remaining four articles are all concerned with the professional development of classroom teachers. A range of methodologies is employed in two regions of the world. Like Teräs, Trudy Belinda Ambler used stories and narrative analysis, in her case to study the professional learning of six primary school teachers in Australia through their everyday stories of classroom work. The research design included teachers reading and discussing transcripts of their stories, which provided another stage of reflection and learning. The narratives reveal a similar richness of experience as the university teachers related, and Ambler maintains not only that the process was beneficial for the teachers' learning about a range of professional matters, but that policymakers and school administrators could benefit from understanding teachers' perceptions of their day-to-day experiences.

The seventh article comes from New Zealand, where a team of researchers led by Lyn McDonald conducted and researched the outcome of an intervention designed to help elementary school teachers employ practices and strategies associated with teachers who have high expectations of their pupils. It was a randomised control design with 43 teachers in the intervention group completing four day-long workshops that incorporated the five elements associated with effective professional development identified by Timperley et al. (2007). After each one researchers visited the teachers in their schools to offer further support and gather data. Other data were generated through evaluations completed by the teachers. It was reported that despite some challenges teachers had incorporated the target practices, and these had been beneficial although the effects on student achievement are not reported in this article. Of particular note is that 'this study aimed to change teacher behaviors in order to change beliefs and expectations about what students can achieve, rather than [the more usual approach of] targeting beliefs in the hopes that behaviors will change'.

The last two articles both come from the USA. The penultimate one with Holly Hansen-Thomas as lead author also relies on self-report, but in relation to professional development needs rather than practices and effects. Specifically, Hansen-Thomas et al. used a questionnaire to ascertain the challenges 159 teachers in rural north Texas experienced with English language learners. Researchers reported detailed statistics of the respondents' demographics, prior training and correlations with the competencies required for English as second language teaching state certification. Hansen-Thomas concluded that teachers in rural areas need graduate level training in teaching English, and went on to make specific recommendations whilst acknowledging limitations to the study. The rural context is important as the number of English language learners is increasing in these areas, although teachers there are unlikely to have had much prior experience of, or training for, teaching such pupils.

Finally, Jan A. Yow and Christine Lotter studied 16 mathematics and science teachers' development as teacher leaders through carefully structured professional development involving an inquiry-based summer institute, follow-up workshops and in-school support. The authors state that their work adds to previous research connecting teacher leadership and professional development (MacBeath and Dempster 2009, Alexandrou and Swaffield 2012) by adding subject specific content. This, together with what they term 'a capstone component' of requiring teachers on

the programme to share their newfound knowledge with colleagues, appear influential in teachers' development. Yow and Lotter collected data through pre- and post-surveys, pre- and post-observations, and teachers' reflective writing. They used a framework of principles and indicators for leadership in mathematics, adapted to include science, to analyse the data, evaluate the programme and consider implications for professional development supporting teacher leadership.

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